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Robinson, Edwin Arlington. The man who died twice. N.Y.  
Macmillan, 1924. 79p. \$1.25.

A narrative poem the subject of which is a too proud and impatient  
man denied by a life of dissolution and drunkenness—

"The king who lost his crown before he had it,  
And saw it melt in hell."

Profound in its philosophical implications, it will repay thoughtful and  
repetitive reading.

11 or 821

24-4331/2





**THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE**

BY  
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

MERLIN  
LANCELOT  
VAN ZORN  
CAPTAIN CRAIG  
THE PORCUPINE  
AVON'S HARVEST  
COLLECTED POEMS  
THE THREE TAVERNS  
THE CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT  
THE TOWN DOWN THE RIVER  
THE MAN AGAINST THE SKY

# THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE

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BY  
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON  
+

New York  
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1924

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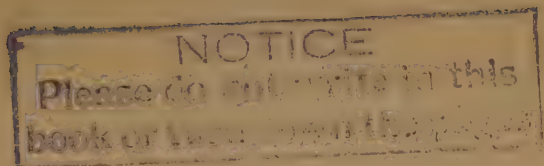


TO  
JAMES EARLE FRASER  
AND  
LAURA GARDIN FRASER



THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE





## THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE

If I had not walked aimlessly up town  
That evening, and as aimlessly walked back,  
My glance had not encountered then, if ever,  
The caps and bonnets of a singing group  
That loudly fought for souls, and was at first  
No more than a familiar spot of sound  
And color in a long familiar scene;  
And even at that, if an oblique persuasion  
Had not withheld me and inveigled me  
To pause, I should have passed as others did,  
Never to guess that while I might have touched  
him,



Fernando Nash was beating a bass drum  
And shouting Hallelujah with a fervor  
At which, as I remember, no man smiled.

Not having seen him for so many years,  
And seeing him now almost as one not there  
Save in remembrance or imagination,  
I made of his identity, once achieved,  
The ruin of a potential world-shaker—  
For whom the world, which had for twenty years  
Concealed him and reduced him, had not shaken.  
Here were the features, and to some degree  
The massive aggregate of the whole man,  
Where former dominance and authority  
Had now disintegrated, lapsed, and shrunken  
To an inferior mystery that had yet  
The presence in defeat. At a first view,

He looked a penitent Hercules, none too long  
Out of a hospital. But seeing him nearer,  
One read where manifest havoc must for years  
Have been at work. What havoc, and what work,  
I partly guessed; for I had known before  
That he had always been, apart from being  
All else he was, or rather along with it,  
The marked of devils—who must have patiently  
And slowly crucified, for subtle sport,  
This foiled initiate who had seen and felt  
Meanwhile the living fire that mortal doors  
For most of us hold hidden. This I believe,  
Though some, with more serenity than assurance,  
May smile at my belief and wish me well.

Puzzled, I waited for a word with him;  
And that was how I came to know all this

That I should not have known, so he averred,  
But for a memory that survived in him  
That I had never yelped at him with others,  
Who feared him, and was not among the biters,  
Who, in the years when he was dangerous  
Had snapped at him until he disappeared  
Into the refuge of remoter streets  
And partly was forgiven. I was grateful—  
Assuring him, as adroitly as I might,  
That had he written me down among the biters,  
I should have mourned his error. "Let them go;  
They were so near forgotten," he said once,  
Up there in his gaunt hall-room not long after,  
"That memory now becomes a punishment  
For nourishing their conceit with my contempt  
As once I did. What music have they made  
So different in futility since then

That one should hear of it? I make a music  
That you can hear all up and down Broadway.  
Glory to God! Mine are the drums of life—  
After those other drums. I had it—once.  
They knew I had it, and they hated me  
For knowing just what they had. I had it—  
once!”

At that his eyes glowed and his body shook,  
And it was time to go. Fernando Nash,  
I saw, would not be long in going farther.  
The rough resentful egoist I had known  
Was now a shell. The giant had been reduced;  
And the old scorn that once had been his faith  
Was now a sacrificial desperation.

A year before I found him in the street  
Pounding a drum and shouting for the lost,

He had for a long time, from his account,  
Inhabited the Valley of the Shadow—  
A region where so many become so few  
To know, that each man there believes himself  
In his peculiar darkness more alone  
Than any other. However that may have been,  
Fernando Nash's darkness we may grant  
Was dark enough, and as peculiar, surely,  
As all those who had bitten him would have had it.  
I was not one of them, though I fear now  
That acquiescence was a larger part  
Than he conceived in me of kindliness;  
And I should not have thought him outwardly  
Much given to soliciting, in those days,  
Attention any softer than respect—  
Which was not always, or by those who feared  
him,

Conferred without a sure and small alloy  
Of hate, that made the giver and gift alike  
A negligible mildew to Fernando,  
In whose equipment of infirmities  
A place that might have held a little envy  
Was overfilled with scorn. Out of his realm,  
And only with a tinkler's apprehension  
Of what those unproved opuses of his  
Were like to do when they began to sing,  
There was no reason in éternity  
For me to be distressed at his assurance  
That they were all immortal. Who was I,  
A hewer of wood, to say that they were not,  
Or to be disaffected if they should be?  
Today I cannot tell you what was in them,  
Nor shall tomorrow know; for they are now,  
As ashes, mute as ashes. Whether he found

Their early glory to be going out,  
Or whether in one last fury against fate  
He made an end of them, as afterwards  
He would have made an end of other relics,  
I do not know. The most he ever told me  
Later about them was that they were dead.  
And how they died, and how much better it was  
For them to be where dead things ought to be—  
Adding at once, that I be not mistaken,  
That he had known himself to be no liar  
The while he praised them. It was not for them  
That he fed scorn to envy in those days,  
Nor out of them so much as out of him  
That envy grew. “They knew I had it—once,”  
He said; and with a scowl said it again,  
Like a child trying twice the bitter taste  
Of an unpalatable panacea;



“They knew I had it—once! Do you remember  
What an upstanding Ajax I was then?  
And what an eye I had? I scorched ’em with it.  
I scared ’em; and they knew I was a giant.  
I knew it, also; and if I had known  
One other thing, I should have gone down then  
Upon my knees for strength—I who believed  
Myself to be secure. They knew a little,  
But they knew nothing of what I know now.  
A year before you found, what’s left of me,  
That evening in the street, I should have said  
My way was blank and ruinous to the end,  
But there was more to be, Glory to God!  
There was to be a more revealing end  
Than that—an end that once had been for me  
The bitterest end of all—and is not so.  
For in the music I have heard since then

There are the drums of life. Glory to God!  
I had it—once.”

So much of him was gone,  
That I would hear no more. All the way home,  
The restive exultation in his eyes  
And in his bearing, altered and subdued,  
Was like that of a dead friend out of hell,  
Humbled, and hardly more than half assured  
Of even his respite. There may have been a  
giant,  
If he must have it so, but where was now  
The man whom I remembered and was once  
Fernando Nash? So much of him was gone,  
That I should never learn, from what remained,  
The story of the rest—or so I thought,  
All the way home. But there was more concealed

Within the shell of him than I supposed—  
More than I know today ; though many a time  
Thereafter I went back to him again,  
Till I had heard enough to make me doubt  
The use of doubting, for he had it—once.  
I had known that, and then for years had lost  
him—

For all those years while he had crushed unripe  
The grapes of heaven to make a wilder wine  
Than earth gives even to giants who are to live  
And still be giants. It may be well for men  
That only few shall have the grapes of heaven  
To crush. The grapes of heaven are golden  
grapes,

And golden dregs are the worst dregs of all—  
Or so Fernando surely would have said  
A year before.

A year before I found him,  
Pounding a drum and shouting to the street,  
Fernando Nash heard clocks across the town  
One midnight, and was forty-five years old;  
And he was too far sundered from his faith  
And his ambition, buried somewhere together  
Behind him, to go stumbling back for them,  
Only to find a shadowy grave that held  
So little and so much. The barren room—  
The same in which I sought him a year later—  
Was not much larger than the iron bed  
On which he sat; and all there was of music  
About the place was in a dusty box  
Of orchestrations for the janitor,  
And in the competent plain face of Bach,  
Calm in achievement, looking down at him  
Like an incurious Titan at a worm,

That once in adolescent insolence  
Would have believed himself another Titan.  
Fernando sat with his large heavy face  
Held forward in his hands and cursed his works  
Till malediction was a weariness,  
And all his makeshift insolence a lie  
That only cravens who had trained themselves  
To fight and had not fought were silly enough  
To fancy for the truth. No insolence  
That he remembered would have been sufficient  
Without additions and foreseen betrayals  
To make of him this penitential emblem  
Of that which he was not. When he had called  
Himself a worm, another worm turned at once  
Within his heart and bit him; and just then  
The candid face of one that heretofore  
Had been for him as near to the divine

As any might be, and through all had remained so,  
Became as if alive there on the wall,  
Transfigured into living recognition,  
Wherein there was much wonder and some pity,  
And more regret. The Titan, it would seem,  
For the first time, and ruinously too late,  
And only for a moment interested,  
Saw what had happened and could do no more,  
Having seen, than to recede ineffably  
Aloft into the distance and the dark,  
Until he was as high as a large star  
That shines on death and life and death in life  
Indifferently. Fernando Nash at length  
Arose, leaving his bed for his one chair;  
And under the sick gleam of one gas-flame,  
That had for years to shadowy lodgers given  
More noise than light, he sat before a glass

That was more like a round malevolent eye  
Filmed with too many derelict reflections,  
Appraising there a bleared and heavy face  
Where sodden evil should have been a stranger.

“What are you doing here? And who are you?”  
He mumbled, with cloudy consciousness  
Of having felt a ghostly blow in the face  
From an unseemly mirrored visitor  
That he had not invited. / “And how long  
Have you been on your way, do you suppose,  
To come to this? If I remember you  
As first you were anointed and ordained,  
There was a daemon in you, not a devil,  
Who told you then that when you heard those  
drums  
Of death, it would be death to follow them.

You were to trust your daemon and to wait,  
And wait, and still to wait. You had it—once.  
You had it then—though you had not yet heard it,  
Coming as it would have to come some time,  
Blown down by choral horns out of a star  
To quench those drums of death with singing fire  
Unfelt by man before. You knew it then.  
You felt it singing down out of the sky  
When you were only a small boy at school;  
And you knew then that it was all for you,  
For you and for the world, that it was coming.  
Where is it now? It may be coming yet,  
For someone else, but you do not know that;  
And that was not what you were meant to know.  
O, you poor toad, why could you not have waited?  
Why did you have to kill yourself like this?  
Why did you let the devil's retinue



That was to be a part be everything,  
And so drive out your daemon till your star  
Should sing unheard for you whose ears were left  
Only for drums and songs of your destroyers?  
And now even they are gone—all but the drums.  
You knew that if you waited, they, not you,  
Should cease—that they should all be hushed at  
last

In that great golden choral fire of sound.  
'Symphony Number Three. Fernando Nash.'  
Five little words, like that, if you had waited,  
Would be enough tonight, you flabby scallion,  
To put you on the small roll of the mighty.  
As for the other two, they're in a box  
Under the bed; and they will soon be nowhere.  
You do not have to mourn now over them,  
For they were only ladders carrying you

Up to the half-way place from which you fell,  
And should have fallen, since you were going to  
fall,

A little faster, and so broken at once  
Your neck. Why could you not have fallen faster  
And saved yourself all this? If you had given  
The devil a sign to play those drums of death  
Longer and louder at about that time,  
You might be now a carrion more at ease  
Than you are like to be till you make haste.  
What else, in God's name, are you waiting for?  
And where's the use? And while I'm asking that;  
Where was the use of all your prentice-years  
Wherein you toiled, while others only tinkled,  
Till you were master of a new machine  
That only your invention could have built  
Or driven? You built it and you let it rust.

A fog of doubt that a small constant fire  
Would have defeated had invisibly  
And imperceptibly crept into it,  
And made the miracle in it that was yours  
A nameless toy for the first imbecile  
To flout who found it—wherefore he'll not find it.  
Presently Number One and Number Two  
Will be beyond all finding. Number Three  
Will not be farther from his eyes tomorrow;  
And they'll all be as safe together then  
As we should be if we had not been born.  
The circle fills itself; and there you are  
Inside it, where you can't crawl out of it.  
It holds you like a rat in a round well,  
Where he has only time and room to swim  
In a ring until he disappears and drowns.  
If it be true that rats abandon ships

That sail away to sink, praise be to rats !  
If you were one, you'd never find another  
For shipmate. He would know you for a fool,  
And therefore dangerous. You're not even a rat;  
For a good rat will wait for what is coming,  
Whether it comes or not. You could not wait,  
Knowing that it must come. You had it—once.  
You had enough of it to make you know,  
And were among the sceptred of the few  
In having it. But where's your sceptre now?  
You threw it away; and then went wallowing  
After that other music, and those drums—  
Assured by more than man's authority  
That all you had not then was only waiting  
To make of that which once was you a torch  
Of sound and fire that was to flood the world  
With wonder, and overwhelm those drums of death

To a last silence that should have no death.  
That would have been somewhat the way of it,  
You somewhat less than eminent dead fish,  
If you had waited and had been content  
To let those devils and those devil-women  
Beat as they would your drums and dance and  
sing

And be invisible. You had followed them,  
And seen and heard enough of them, God knows,  
Already. Your daemon had a lenience then,  
And you had not the protest of a soul  
Between you and your right to stay alive;  
All which was as it was. But it was so  
No longer when you knew it was not so,  
And that one day a bush might bloom with fire  
At any trivial hour of inattention,  
Whereafter your employment would have been

A toil of joy for immortality.

Your drums of death, from which it all began,  
Would then have been illusions most enduring  
When most entirely and divinely dead;  
And you, Fernando Nash, would now have been—  
But who's alive to know that you're alive  
To care? Look at that burned out face of yours,  
You bloated greasy cinder, and say who.  
Say who's to care, and then say, if you will,  
Why anyone in a world where there's a cockroach,  
Should care for you. You insufficient phoenix  
That has to bake at last in his own ashes—  
You kicked out, half-hatched bird of paradise  
That had to die before you broke your shell,—  
Who cares what you would be if you had flown?  
A bird that men are never to see flying,  
Or to hear singing, will not hold them long

Away from less ethereal captivations;  
Just as a fabulous and almighty fish  
That never swam to sight will hardly be  
For long the unsighted end of their pursuit.  
Why do you make then such a large ado  
Over such undefended evidence?  
You fat and unsubstantial jelly-fish,  
That even your native ocean has disowned  
And thrown ashore, why should men ask or care  
What else you would have been if you had  
waited?  
You crapulous and overgrown sick lump  
Of failure and premeditated ruin,  
What do you think you are—one of God's jokes?  
You slunk away from him, still adequate  
For his immortal service, and you failed him;  
And you knew all the while what you were doing.

You damned yourself while you were still alive.  
You bulk of nothing, what do you say to that?  
You paramount whale of lust and drunkenness,  
You thing that was, what do you say to that?"

No man so near to glory as he was once  
Was ever, I fancied, quite so inglorious  
As in his penance—which is here somewhat  
Softened in deference to necessity—  
Fernando Nash revealed himself to me  
In passionate reminiscence a year later.  
Occasional strokes, at least, among the many  
That I had counted must have registered  
Luxurious and unmerited flagellation,  
Wherein abasement was akin to pride,  
If not a part of it. No man so mired  
As he was in his narrative, I told him,



Could have such choral gold poured down from  
heaven

When he was young. But there he shook his head  
In hopeless pity—not for the doomed, I saw,  
But rather for the sanguine ordinary  
That sees no devil and so controls itself,  
Having nothing in especial to control.

“Hewers of wood,” I said, “and drawers of  
water

Will always in their innocence be insisting  
That your enamel of unrighteousness  
Is too thick to be real.” In his changed eyes,  
Where the old fire was gone, there was almost  
The coming of a smile: “How do you know?”  
He answered, asking. “What have you done to  
know?

Where have you been that you should think you  
know?

Do you remember when I told you once  
That every sleeve of genius hides a knife  
That will, if necessary, carve a way  
Through snakes and oxen? Most that I said  
then

Has gone with all the rest, but I keep this  
As a memorial of my retribution.

I wonder if a notion has yet seized you  
To bury the keenest sword you ever saw  
For twenty years in mud, and then go back  
To find what may be left of it. If not,  
You need not. Save your curiosity  
Two decades of unprofitable conjecture,  
And look at me. Look at Fernando Nash,—  
The heir-apparent of a throne that's ashes,

The king who lost his crown before he had it,  
And saw it melt in hell."

When he had ceased  
I could almost have heard those drums of death  
Pounding him on to a defeated grave,  
Which, had I not by chance encountered him  
Beating another drum for the Lord's glory  
There in the street, would have been no man's  
grave,

Like that of one before him who still wears  
The crown he could not lose. I thought of him,  
Whose tomb was an obscure and stormy legend,  
Sure of how little he had cared for that—  
And how much less would this man here have cared  
Whether he found a nameless grave, or no grave,  
So long as he had left himself alive

Behind him in a world that would have loved him  
Only the more for being out of it.  
That long orchestral onslaught of redemption  
Would have exonerated flesh and folly  
And been his everlasting epitaph—  
Which time would then have read as variously  
As men are various in their ways and means  
Of reading. That would have cancelled every-  
thing,  
And all his earthly debts—or left him willing  
To pay them peradventure as they might  
Or must be paid. But they had run too long.  
His birthright, signed away in fettered sloth  
To the most ingenious and insatiable  
Of usurers, had all vanished; and the more  
He might have been a king, the more their greed  
Would mock him and his tatters, and abase him;

And his vituperative temporizing  
Over a soul in rags would mend no holes.  
“But there’s a crown that even the lowliest  
May learn to wear,” he said. “Glory to God!”  
And his eyes glittered with an icy joy  
That made me hope that he was wearing it.  
“Of course we can’t forget,” he said in answer  
To doubt that in my silence may have spoken;  
“Yet there is much that we may leave behind,  
And there is always more if we go on.”

In marking after that the accuracy  
Of his minute recount, I found it hard  
Not to believe that he remembered all—  
Save that which of itself was everything,  
Or once had been so. There before the mirror,  
That bitter midnight when he heard the clocks,

There was not much forgetting; and since then  
Only one year was gone. Before that glass  
He must have sat for more than a long hour,  
Hurling the worst of his vocabulary  
At his offending image. "Now you have learned  
A part of what you are," he told his face,  
"And you may say whatever occurs to you  
As an addendum. You deficient swine,  
Where do you see the best way out of it?  
You are not crazy enough to cut your throat;  
You are not solid enough to shoot yourself.  
There's always water, but you don't like that;  
And you're not sure enough of what might happen  
If you should inadvertently have swallowed  
A few small pills. But there's another way—  
A longer and a more monotonous one,  
Yet one that has no slight ascendancy

Over the rest; for if you starve to death,  
Maybe the God you've so industriously  
Offended in most ways accessible  
Will tell you something; and if you live again  
You may attain to fewer discrepancies  
In less within you that you may destroy.  
That's a good way for you to meet your doubt,  
And show at the same time a reverence  
That's in you somewhere still." And I believe,  
Though he may well then have believed in nothing  
More real than a defective destiny,  
That it was in him somewhere, as he said.  
There was a fervor in his exclamation  
That was not only drama; though I question  
Whether I should have found him and his drum  
That evening a year after, in the street,  
If he had not gone farther, while he starved,

Into the valley—which had for twenty years  
Already beguiled and held him. What had been  
Without this uncompanied expiation,  
I do not know, and I might never have known.  
The shape of one more foiled obscurity  
Might some time as a cadaver have ensured  
A massive and unusual exhibition  
Of God's too fallible image—and no more.  
Though some had wondered idly, and they might,  
Why the defeated features of a giant  
Should have been moulded so imperiously  
To be the mask of frailty in oblivion,  
None would have rated such a scrapped utensil  
As more than common, or uncommon, waste;  
None would have guessed what violent fire had  
once,  
In such a cracked abandoned crucible,



Fused with inseparable obscure alloy  
Celestial metal, which would else have been  
The fabric of a seething instrument  
That might have overflowed with other fire  
Brought falling from ethereal distances.

It might, I say, cleaving inveterately  
To my conviction that in this man's going  
More went than when in Venice went the last  
Authentic wizard, who in his house of sound  
Hears not the siege of Time. Failing a way  
To prove that one obscure evangelist,  
Beating a drum and shouting for the Lord,  
Not only might have been (to fill again  
That weary sieve with wine) but was in fact  
A giant among fewer than half your fingers  
Of Jubel's clan,—and surely having given

Credulity, dismayed imaginably  
In retrospect, extenuating warrant  
To hang itself conveniently at leisure,—  
Only Fernando Nash's narrative  
Will now avail me for the confirmation  
Of more, I fear, than the confirmable—  
As he would have foretold. Reverting quaintly  
And incompatibly with his arrogance  
To the weak stings of his inferiors,  
And even while dying, he smiled. "Poor souls,"  
          he said,  
"That are born damned, although they may be  
          feared  
May be forgiven, though hated, and then hanged;  
Whereas my early colleagues, had they known  
How soon and surely I was to damn myself,  
Not only would have ceased their fearing me,

But would have loved me—seeing that I was  
doomed.

That midnight—when I cursed myself so long—  
Roundly and rightly, be it well understood—  
There came a few revealing memories  
That set me then to wondering just what soft  
And anaesthetic language of affection  
They would have brought for me if they had  
known

How far I was from all that formerly  
Had for so long offended and oppressed them.  
Poor children!—and they might all have been  
happy

If in the place of misapplied creation  
A more discriminate wisdom had supplied  
Discrimination—and some humility  
Before God's few that are in spite of us

Surviving, somehow." And all this to me  
Was not quite so irrelevant as to others  
It may at first appear; for the same thought  
Pursued me always in those other days  
When I had harmonized ingeniously  
Some brief and unoffending cerebation  
Which, had it been one, would have been a song.  
To some persuasion sharper than advice  
I must have yielded slowly and at last  
Let fall my lyre into the fearsome well  
Of truth, hearing no protest from below;  
Thereby surviving bitterness to indite  
This tale of one who foundered in a slough  
More fearsome, and lost there a mightier lyre.

He was not humble, this Fernando Nash;  
Yet while he may have ministered on occasion

To a discreet humility in others,  
I doubt if in the scorn he flung to us,  
Mostly in silence, his preoccupation  
Saw crumbs of any nurture less assuaging  
Than wholesome and unfrosted honesty;  
Albeit his arrogance may have merited  
The few vindictive nippings that amazed  
As much as they annoyed, and would have seemed  
Allegiance, had their negligible venom  
Been isolated from another virus,  
Which later was to be a leprosy  
Of self-contempt attending revelation.

When he had heard the last stroke of those clocks,  
And called himself again the last hard name  
That his abundant lexicon released,  
He tore those two initial symphonies

Into as many pieces of oblivion  
As he had reasons, or believed he had,  
After those empty years, for their extinction.  
“They were so ‘temerarious’ and ‘exotic’  
When they were written twenty years ago,  
He said, “that all who saw them, laughed at them—  
Not seeing with me that they would be today  
About as temerarious and exotic  
As Händel’s hat. They were good harbingers,  
But were they living they would not be mine;  
They were not what it was that I was doing  
The while I did them. Many, if they were theirs,  
Would eat their ears for joy, but they’re not  
theirs,  
Or mine. Glory to God, they’re nowhere now.  
They were not mine; they were not yet the vin-  
tage;

Though I should have enjoyed, when I was young,  
The taste of them. But they were not the wine  
To fill my cup, and now it doesn't matter."

There was for some time an obscurity  
For me in such a reasoning, but I learned,  
And I have striven loyally to believe  
That he did well—sure that he did not well  
In going down those dark stairs again that night  
For the beginning of a last debauch  
That was to be a prelude, as he put it,  
Wincing in reminiscence, for a fugue  
Of ravening miseries and recriminations  
Assembling in remorseful exposition  
That was to be remorseless and infernal  
Before they were devouring one another  
In a malicious fantasy more infernal,

And richer in dissonance and involution  
Than all his dreams together had heretofore  
Aspired or dared to be. When halfway down  
The second of those four forbidding stairways,  
He heard those drums again, and on his face  
He felt with more resentment than alarm  
A touch of warning, like a chilly wind  
Within a tomb. "You are too late," he said,  
Holding his heavy jaws harder together;  
"And you have come too many times before."  
Then he went grimly down and out of doors,  
And was alone there in a lonely street  
That led where soon he might not be so lonely,  
Or so severe in his particulars.

After three weeks that would have relegated  
A village blacksmith or a stevedore



Of mortal average to a colder sleep  
Than has a waking, he awoke one day  
Late in the afternoon, miraculously  
In bed again and wondering, as before,  
How this time he had got there. Looking up,  
He met the face of Bach upon the wall,  
Who bowed at him, gravely but not unkindly;  
And he, not yet alive to what was coming,  
And not to be defective in attention  
To a great master, bowed acknowledgment;  
Whereat the salutations were repeated,  
And there was a preparatory silence,  
Heavy with strangeness and expectancy,  
Which would have been a monitory dread—  
But for the master's nod of satisfaction  
And interest in the coming through a keyhole  
Of a slow rat, equipped with evening dress,

Gold eye-glasses, and a conductor's wand,  
Soon followed by a brisk and long procession  
Of other rats, till more than seventy of them,  
All dressed in black and white, and each of them  
Accoutred with his chosen instrument,  
Were ranged in order on the footworn carpet  
That lay between Fernando and the door.  
Having no chairs, they stood erect and ready,  
And having made obeisance to the master  
Upon the wall, who signified his pleasure,  
And likewise to the man upon the bed,  
They played with unforeseen solemnity  
The first chords of the first rat symphony  
That human ears had heard. Baffled and scared,  
Fernando looked at Bach, who nodded slowly,  
And, as he fancied, somewhat ominously;  
And still the music sounded, weird but firm,

And the more fearful as it forged along  
To a dark and surging climax, which at length  
Broke horribly into coarse and unclean laughter  
That rose above a groaning of the damned;  
And through it all there were those drums of  
death,

Which always had been haunting him from childhood.

Without a formal ending, or any sign  
That there was ever to be an end, the rats  
Danced madly to the long cacophony  
They made, and they made faces at Fernando  
The while they danced—till one of them, the  
leader,  
Bowed mockingly, and vanished through the key-  
hole,

As he had come; and after him went others,

Each with a leering courtesy as he went,  
Till more than seventy of them disappeared,  
Leaving their auditor lying there alone  
In a cold sweat, while his impassive master  
Frowned, shook his head, and was again a picture.

Fernando Nash, deploring afterwards  
This innovation of orchestral rats  
As a most arbitrary intermezzo  
Between the sordid prelude that was over  
And the infernal fugue that was to come,  
Smiled wearily, and shrugged his heavy shoulders,  
Like one who would be glad to say no more,  
Yet must relate the rest to somebody  
Before he died. Somebody might believe him;  
And it was I, who had not bitten him  
(Achilles' heel was never to be cured),

Who might, if anyone might, believe him now,  
And say to others that he was not mad  
Through that incessant week of lonely torture  
Which no food would have eased, and through the  
days

That followed while he starved indomitably,  
With a cold hope that his long-punished heart  
Would after time be still. Day after day,  
And endless night following endless night,  
There were those miseries and recriminations  
Devouring one another but never dead,  
Until one afternoon he lay remembering  
The day when those unusual visitors  
Had made a more unusual music for him,  
And having made it mocked him and departed.  
Again he looked up at the face of Bach,  
Considering wearily, with a bleak regret

How far those features in their dusty frame  
Were now from seeing that there was in this world  
So frail a relic as Fernando Nash,  
And how much farther still they were from caring,  
With more than common care, could they have seen  
him.

Could they have seen him they would not have  
known

What fires had burned in that cadaverous ruin  
Below them, or what hopes, or what remorse,  
Or what regret. For a long time he lay  
Aware of action hardly in a finger,  
But with a coming wonder of surprise  
For a new clearness which had late begun  
To pierce forbidden chambers long obscured  
Within him, and abandoned, being so dark  
And empty that he would not enter them—

Fearful of what was not there to be found  
Should he go there to see. They might be dark,  
But folly that made them so had kept them so,  
Like an indulgent slayer who binds a wound  
That he has washed with a lethargic poison,  
And waits at ease with his malignity  
For stagnant fury to accumulate  
A mortal sloth within—and in so far  
As that was in a manner merciful,  
Though now it seemed there was to be an end  
Of even that mercy. After a grateful darkness,  
There was to be the pain of seeing too clearly  
More than a man so willing to see nothing  
Should have to see.

Still motionless, he lay there  
Laboring to persuade a lying hope

That this new clarity was the light that comes  
Before the night comes, and would not last long—  
Yet knowing that it was not. Like shining grain,  
Long fouled and hidden by chaff and years of dust  
In a dark place, and after many seasons  
Winnowed and cleaned, with sunlight falling  
on it,

His wits were clear again. He had no power  
To use them, and at first repudiated  
The faintest wakening flicker of any wish  
For use of any such power. But a short fight  
Found his whole fragile armor of negation  
So tattered that it fell away from him  
Like time-worn kingly rags of self-delusion  
At the rough touch of the inevitable—  
Till he confessed a rueful willingness  
To reason that with time and care this power



Would come, and coming might be used. He  
smiled

And closed his eyes, finding an awkward humor  
In such an unforeseen enfranchisement  
From such a long and thwarting servitude.  
A calm that all his life had been a stranger  
To the confusions that were born with him  
Composed and overpowered him as he felt,  
Enveloping and persuading body and brain  
Together, a cool relief as if warm wings  
Were in the air above him. So there he lay,  
Without a motion or a wish to move,  
And with a sense of having only to rise  
And give his hands to life. A grateful shame  
For all his insults to the Holy Ghost  
That were forgiven was like an anodyne  
Laid on a buried wound somewhere within him,

Deeper than surgeons go; and a vast joy,  
Which broke and swept and covered him like a  
    sea

Of innocence, leaving him eager as a child  
That has outlived experience and remembers  
Only the golden moment as it flows,  
Told him in silence that was more than speech  
That after passion, arrogance and ambition,  
Doubt, fear, defeat, sorrow and desperation,  
He had wrought out of martyrdom the peace  
That passeth understanding. Still he lay there  
Smiling to think how soon those burrowing teeth  
Which he had felt within him for so long  
Would cease their famished gnawing at his heart,  
Which after all the many prolonged assaults  
It had survived was toiling loyally,  
With only an uncertain fire to drive it;

And still he would not move. There would be  
time

For all things in their order. He was hungry—  
Hungry beyond a longer forced endurance,  
But in this new unwillingness not to live,  
No longer forced, there was a gratefulness  
Of infinite freedom and humility,  
After a bondage of indignant years  
And evil sloth; and there was in this calm,  
Which had unlooked for/been so long in coming,  
A balanced wealth of debts and benefits  
Vaster than all ambition or achievement.  
Hereafter it would be enough to serve,  
And let the chosen shine.

So there he lay,  
Luxuriating vaguely on the moment

When he should rise and with a blessed effort  
Go down those shadowy stairs again for food;  
And if in his prevision of that moment  
He had not lain so long awaiting it,  
Those drums of death might opportunely then  
Have stayed an hour the sound of their approach,  
Throbbing as always, and intolerably,  
Through stifling clouds of sound that hid, like  
flames,  
Tumultuous and elusive melodies,  
Now for so long imprisoned as no longer  
To be released. Hearing them first, and faintly,  
For once and for once only without flinching,  
He smiled and sighed. Let others, if they must,  
Hear them and follow them. He was at peace  
With them for the first time in recollection,  
And willingly for the future would remain so.

At last alive, it was enough to serve,  
And so to be content where God should call  
him;

But there must be no haste. His fires were low,  
And too much fuel might yet extinguish them.

At first he must be frugal with his coals,  
If only for the peril of too much comfort  
Given at once, and without more atonement.

So arrogant in his new humility  
Was he becoming, and so chary was he  
Of exultation, that to break his fast  
With no excess of zeal he planned a fare  
That would have saddened Simeon on his pillar;  
And he might soon have been in search of it,  
Had not another silence, like a blow  
That somehow stunned him to clairvoyant awe,  
Held him as if mysterious hands had bound him

With cords he could not see. Now he could hear  
Those drums again, and they were coming nearer,  
Still muffled within the same unyielding cloud  
Of sound and fire, which had somewhere within it  
A singing flame that he might not for long  
Endure, should such a mocking hour as this  
Be the one hour of all when after years  
Of smouldering it should leap at him and scorch  
him.

He felt his fingers clutching hungrily  
At nothing, as the fingers of one drowning  
Would clutch at seaweed floating where he sank;  
And he could feel the pounding of those drums  
Like iron upon the fibre of his brain.  
His feeble heart was leaping, and a cold  
Invisible hand was heavy on his throat—  
As if in mercy, if it need be so,

To strangle him there before he knew too soon  
What he must know too late.

Now it was fear,  
Not peace, that falling on him like a wave,  
Covered and overwhelmed him; it was fear,  
Not peace, that made him cold and left him trem-  
bling

After the cold had passed. The coming drums  
Were like the vanguard of a Juggernaut  
Approaching slowly through a rolling cloud  
Of fiery sound that was anon to burst  
And inundate him with an ecstasy  
Of mad regret before those golden wheels  
Behind should crush him. He could only wait,  
Therefore, and in his helplessness be seared  
With his own lightning. When the music leapt

Out of that fiery cloud and blinded him,  
There would be recognition for a moment,  
And then release. So his prophetic fancy,  
Smiting him with deceit, foresaw the blow,  
Not seeing what other shafts of doom and mercy  
There are from which an injured God may choose  
The one or many that in his exigence  
His leisure may affect. Seldom it is  
The mightier moments of necessity  
That we can see are coming come to us  
As we have seen them. Better or worse for us,  
Anticipation waits upon surprise;  
And though Fernando Nash in his exhaustion  
Prayed now for that cold hand upon his throat  
To close and have it over, no cold hand  
Was there to close. Now there was nothing for  
him



But to lie still and hear those coming drums,  
Muffled as always in a smoky cloud  
Of burning sound that in a moment more  
Would burst above him into flaming rain  
That once he would have welcomed on his knees,  
Unspeakably; and so he might have done  
Could he have waited with his inner doors  
Unbarred to the celestial messengers  
Who may have come and gone a score of times,  
Only to find again, and 'still again,  
That he was absent on another journey  
Into the dismal valley of the shadow  
That was to be his home. But that was over.  
They had not found him then. He had not  
waited.

Failing a willingness to be assured  
That in so doing he would have left by now

The worst of a light burden far behind him  
And found the rest to be Olympian gold,  
He had impawned it all for mouldy pottage.

Telling me that, he sighed and shut his teeth,  
And with a mortal smile shook his large head  
At me before he went back to those drums.  
They were not going to sound, as it appeared,  
Their long approach for ever, but were soon  
To cease, and only intermittently  
Be heard again till choral gold came down  
Out of a star to quench and vanquish them  
With molten glory. Trembling there alone,  
He knew that there would now be falling on him  
The flaming rain he feared, or the one shaft  
Of singing fire that he no longer feared—  
At which that hand might close upon his throat

Till in oblivion there might then be peace;  
And so at first there was—if there be peace  
In the complete oblivion of achievement.

Instead of bursting as he prayed it might,  
And ending him with one destroying blast  
Of unendurable fulfilment, slowly  
And imperceptibly that cloud of sound  
Became a singing mist, which, having melted,  
Revealed a fire that he had always felt,  
But never known before. No lightning shaft  
Of blinding and immediate dissolution  
Was yet impending: there was only joy,  
And a vast wonder that all this had been  
So near him for so long. Smiling and still,  
He listened gratefully. It had come at last;  
And those far sent celestial messengers

That he had for so long a time denied  
Had found him now. He had offended them,  
He had insulted and forsaken them,  
And he was not forsaken. They had come,  
And in their coming had remembered only  
That they were messengers, who like himself  
Had now no choice; and they were telling him  
this

In the last language of mortality,  
Which has no native barrier but the grave.  
Now it was theirs to sing and his to wear  
The glory, although there was a partnership  
Somewhere that a surviving grace in him  
Remembered; for though the star from which they  
came

Shone far within the dark infinity  
That was himself, he had not made it shine—

Albeit he may have wrought more notably  
Than might another for its extinguishment.

But there was time for not much more of that  
Than a bewildered smile of acquiescence.

The quivering miracle of architecture  
That was uprising lightly out of chaos,  
And out of all the silence under time,  
Was a gay temple where the Queen of Life  
And her most loyal minions were protracting  
Melodious and incessant festival  
To the least lenient of divinities.

Joy, like an infinite wine, was everywhere,  
Until it proved itself at last a languor,  
Now less engrossed with festive pageantry  
Than with an earth-born sensuous well-being  
Which in the festive pageant was divine.

Of all the many of those who danced and sang  
And celebrated, there was none to note  
A silent entrance of the most abhorred  
And oldest of all uninvited strangers—  
A lean and slinking mute with a bassoon,  
Who seized attention when a languid hush  
Betrayed a perilous rift of weariness  
Where pleasure was not joy, and blew a tune  
Of hollow triumph on a chilly reed  
From which all shrank. The tumult after that  
Was an unprized expenditure of beauty  
Awaiting doom. It was awaiting also  
The faint approach of slow, infernal drums  
That were not long in coming, bringing with them  
A singing horde of demons, men and women,  
Who filled the temple with offensive yells  
And sang to flight the frightened worshippers.

Fearing to think, he lay as one secure  
So long as he lay motionless. If he moved  
It might be only to plunge down again  
Into a more chaotic incoherence  
And a more futile darkness than before.  
There was no need of moving, and no need  
Of asking; for he knew, as he had known  
For years, unheard, that passionate regret  
And searching lamentation of the banished,  
Who in abandoned exile/saw below them  
The desecrated lights of a domain  
Where they should walk no more. Inaudible  
At first, he knew it only as a presence  
Intangible, but he knew that it was there;  
And as it went up slowly to the stars  
Carrying all the sorrow of man with it,  
He trembled that he should so long have been

So near to seizing immortality.

Well, here it was. And while he might have died

{ If it had ceased, he would have been as one  
Who cared no more, having had everything,

Where there was no more caring. But he knew

That he was not yet dead, and that the rest

Would soon be coming. When the voices fell,

He knew that through them he should hear those  
drums

Again, but he was not afraid of them.

They were his drums, and the far sound of riot

Below there in the gloom was also his.

It was all his to give. "Poor fool," he thought;

"Praise God you are a fool, and call it yours."

And he lay tranquil through another silence.

Though he condemned the specious tyranny



Of illustrations and explicit schemes,  
He kept in his creative charnel house  
More pictures hidden of the dead and dying  
Than men should see; and there were these among  
    them,

Which he submitted once, reluctantly,  
As to a loyal friend who would forgive them,  
And then forget. Yet I remember now  
That in the place of languid folly flown  
To mourn apart, bereft of its illusions,  
The desolation of its realities,  
There woke amid the splendors that were lost  
A frantic bacchanale of those usurpers,  
Who in affronting life with evil rites  
Of death, knew not themselves to be the dead—  
In false authority mistaking riot  
And scorn for power, and hell for paradise.

Intoxicated by their swift invasion  
Whereafter conquest was an easy trifle,  
And hating the magnificence they cursed,  
Seeing not the beauty or the use of it,  
They soiled with earthy feet the shining floor  
Flinging the dregs of their debaucheries  
From crystal cups against the gleaming walls  
Of Life's immortal house. Too ignorant  
Of where they were to be afraid to know,  
They shrieked and sang in shrill delirium  
With vicious ecstasy for louder drums—  
Till, crowning insolence with infamy,  
They must have wearied God—who, pitying them,  
Smote with avenging trumpets into silence  
All but those drums of death, which, played by  
Death  
Himself, were beating sullenly alone.

They ceased, and after stillness in which time  
And space, together perishing, were no more  
To him than indecisions that were gone,  
Far off there was a murmur and a stirring  
Of liberation, and a marching hymn  
Sang of a host returning. All the banished  
Who had been driven from the house of life  
To wander in the valley of the shadow  
Were sounding as they came in chastened order  
The praise of their deliverance and return.  
A singing voice that gathered and ascended  
Filled the vast dome above them till it glowed  
With singing light that seemed at first eternal,  
But was at first not so. There were those drums  
Again, to frustrate with a last intrusion  
The purifying and supreme festival  
Of life that had returned and in its house

Was daring to be free. But freedom wavered  
Out of the voices that were praising it;  
And while it wavered, the lean hand of Death  
Beat with a desperate malevolence,  
More sinister in its evil emptiness  
Than when that carnal chorus of the dead,  
With corybantic and infatuate glee  
Had howled it out of hearing—till once more  
There were those golden trumpets, and at last  
There was that choral golden overflow  
Of sound and fire, which he had always heard—  
And had not heard before. Now it had come,  
And had not gone. Nothing had gone that came.  
All he had known and had not waited for  
Was his; and having it, he could not wait now.  
With blinding tears of praise and of exhaustion  
Pouring out of his eyes and over his cheeks,

He groped and tottered into the dark hall,  
Crying aloud for God, or man, or devil,  
For paper—not for food. It may have been  
The devil who heard him first and made of him,  
For sport, the large and sprawling obstacle  
They found there at the bottom of the stairs.

A fortnight after that, Fernando Nash  
Lay contemplating with a special envy  
A screen between him and another bed  
That would anon be vacant. For some time,  
So he had learned, the probabilities  
Had seen for him a similar departure,  
But seeing indifferently at the last hour  
That some residual and peculiar service  
Awaited the survival of as much  
As was remaining of him to survive,

Had left him and abandoned him again  
To life. The fire of personality,  
Still glowing within him, drew mysteriously  
From those assisting at his resurrection  
A friendly patience, and a sort of wonder  
That wore a laughing kindness. With a lesion  
Like his there would be no more golden fire  
Brought vainly by perennial messengers  
For one that would no longer recognize them,  
Or know that they had come. There were some-  
where

Disfigured outlines of a glory spoiled  
That hovered unrevealed and unremembered,  
But they were like to those of blinding jewels  
Wrought beyond earth to value beyond earth,  
To be defaced and hammered valueless  
By a sick idiot, and insanely sunk

In darker water than where ships go down  
Hull-crushed at midnight. When he told me that,  
He may have had a vision of himself  
In his last, starless plunge. "Make a swift end  
Of what I leave behind," he said to me.  
"Burn me to ashes; and when that is done,  
Take me somewhere to sea and let me sink,  
And fear not for my soul. I have found that,  
Though I have lost all else. All but those drums;  
And they are but the last hope of the devil.  
Mine are the drums of life—and they are mine.  
You may not like them. All I ask of you  
Is to believe me when I say to you  
That what I had, I had. It was no dream  
That followed me so long, and found me only  
To make of me a child that should henceforth  
Go into streets and beat the drums of life.

I make a joyful noise unto the Lord,  
But I know it's a noise, and the Lord knows it—  
Just as he knows that I have told to you  
Only the truth, and that I had it—once.  
Fool as I was and remnant as I am,  
My prayer will be to you that you forget me,  
If in your memory there survive a doubt  
That I was less than you believed I was  
Till I was chastened. For I swear to you  
That as I knew the quality, not slight,  
Of a young harvest that I would not save,  
I know that in the fields where kings have been  
Before me there was never found by them  
A sheaf more golden than the grain I lost  
When the Lord smote my field that afternoon.  
I am not telling you this to salve a bruise,  
For now the bruise is healed. I shall go lame



Because of it, but the Lord's ways are strange,  
And I am not to suffer; and I believe  
The reason for this is that I have not lied.  
I have not lied to Him in praising Him,  
Nor more to you in praising what He gave me  
And in his wisdom took away again.  
We cannot measure what the world has lost  
Until we know the gauge the builders use  
Who made it. All we know about the world  
For certain is that it appears to be.  
And in so far as I am sure of that  
So am I sure that I was once as much  
As you believed and others feared I was.  
I have not drugged a clamoring vanity  
With lies that for a little while may seem  
To sweeten truth. There was no need of that;  
And God knows now that there is less than ever.

Now I can beat my drum and let those drums  
Of death pound as they will. Once, for an hour,  
I lived; and for an hour my cup was full  
With wine that not a hundred, if a score,  
Have tasted that are told in history.  
Having it unconfirmed, I might be mad  
Today if a wise God had not been kind,  
And given me zeal to serve Him with a means  
That you deplore and pardonably distrust.  
The dower of ignorance is to distrust  
All that it cannot feel, and to be rich  
In that which it has not. I can be rich  
In all that I have had, and richer still  
In this that I have now. Glory to God!  
Mine are the drums of life, and though I wait  
For no more messengers—or for none save one,  
Who will be coming soon—I had it, once.

Not more than once or twice, and hardly that,  
In a same century will another have it,  
To know what I have lost. You do not know.  
I've made for you only a picture of it,  
No worse or better than a hundred others  
Might be of the same thing—all mostly trash.  
But I have found far more than I have lost  
And so shall not go mourning. God was good  
To give my soul to me before I died  
Entirely, and He was no more than just  
In taking all the rest away from me.  
I had it, and I knew it; and I failed Him.  
I did not wait."

"You could not wait," I told him,  
"Instead of moulding you to suit the rules,  
They made you mostly out of living brimstone,

And set you in a somewhat fiery world  
Not to be burnt." But there he shook his head  
And looked at me as he had looked before,  
Like one who was a little sorry for me.  
I had made several entrances already  
With my determinism, and always failed.  
He would have none of it. He was to blame,  
And it was only right that he should lose  
What he had won too late. "Why pity me?"  
He asked, strangely, "You see that I'm content.  
I shall not have to be here very long,  
And there's not much that I may do for God  
Except to praise Him. I shall not annoy you,  
Or your misguided pity, with my evangel,  
For you must have yours in another dress.  
I shall not ask if you believe me wise  
In this that I am doing. I do not care.

I'll only ask of you that you believe  
What I have told you. For I had it—once."

To each his own credulity, I say,  
And ask as much. Fernando Nash is dead;  
And whether his allegiance to the Lord  
With a bass drum was earnest of thanksgiving,  
Confusion, penance, or the picturesque,  
Is not the story. There was in the man,  
With all his frailties and extravagances,  
The caste of an inviolable distinction  
That was to break and vanish only in fire  
When other fires that had so long consumed him  
Could find no more to burn; and there was in him  
A giant's privacy of lone communion  
With older giants who had made a music  
Whereof the world was not impossibly

Not the last note; and there was in him always,  
Unqualified by guile and unsubdued  
By failure and remorse, or by redemption,  
The grim nostalgic passion of the great  
For glory all but theirs. And more than these,  
There was the nameless and authentic seal  
Of power and of ordained accomplishment—  
Which may not be infallibly forthcoming,  
Yet in this instance came. So I believe,  
And shall, till admonition more disastrous  
Than any that has yet imperilled it  
Invalidates conviction. Though at first,  
And many a time thereafter, my persuasion  
May well have paused and halted, I believe  
Today that all he told me for the truth  
Was true—as I believed him long ago  
To be the giant of his acknowledgment.

Crippled or cursed or crucified, the giant  
Was always there, and always will be there.  
For reasons less concealed and more sufficient  
Than words will ever make them, I believe him  
Today as I believed him while he died,  
And while I sank his ashes in the sea.

1410









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